EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Implementing the paradigm of Ecotourism and conservation of forest and wildlife in the protected areas has been an untiring effort of the national and international organizations to establish a symbiotic relationship for the larger benefits of sustainable human habitations. It is better late than never, many initiatives were reinforced during the celebrations of the International Year of Ecotourism in 2002 with a theme “Ecotourism-A Key to Sustainable Development”. As a signatory of the declarations, India has agreed to embrace the principles of ecotourism in the protected areas as they are the open laboratory for the students, scholars, nature lovers, etc to learn, appreciate, admire and respect the pristine beauty and its serenity. Kerala was the first state to implement the ecotourism projects with the involvement of the EDCs and this has become an example for other states in India. The Periyar Tiger Reserve is one of the oldest protected areas which have become an internationally known wildlife tourism destination. It has gained worldwide visibility for its salubrious climate, captivating wildlife, lovely people and the striking cultural activities along with the facilities and amenities.

There is a growing demand for visiting ecotourism sites for novelty and originality and the trend is to visit the undisturbed and uncontaminated nature scenic places for the purpose of studying and admiring the priceless beauty of the nature. Indian in general and Kerala in particular have made all possible efforts to woo maximum foreign tourists for ecotourism and wildlife tourism. Kerala as such has been branded as a “God’s Own Country” with abundance of natural scenic beauty and awe-inspiring topography and the PTR has grown to become a must-see destination for wildlife spotting and diverse ecotourism activities. In this connection, the PTR has been enticing a large
number of foreign and domestic visitors, including the day visitors for about 8-9 months in a year. Moreover, the Administration of the Tiger Reserve has identified the ecotourism as an important means for the generation of revenue for meeting the overhead expenditures and the socio-economic development in the local area. The impacts that have occurred at the PTR and its adjoining areas need to be studied for the administration of Tiger Reserve and tourism organizations to take corrective actions for sustainable development.

With this backdrop, an attempt was made to study on two important constructs like Visitor Satisfaction and Community Empowerment for sustainable ecotourism in the PTR. The argument on which the study has built is that visitors are the integral part of ecotourism projects and their presence and participation can make the project more sustainable and community members for whom the ecotourism projects are implemented are also equally important for sustainable ecotourism projects. Both are closely knitted each other in contributing the PTR immensely. The problem for which the study has been conducted has been identified as the mismatch between the visitors on the facilities, amenities, service quality, disaster preparedness and value-added services as well as community members on the socio-economic development. However, visitors are concerned for value for money and community members are worried for their rights and privileges from the ecotourism projects.

This study is significant for providing practical solutions to the planners, policymakers and service providers as far as the issues connected to visitor satisfactions and community empowerment. Further, the study has uncovered the problems pertaining to sustainable ecotourism and the relationship between visitor satisfaction and community
empowerment. In order to present the study in a logical and scientific manner, five chapters have been created to incorporate the theoretical and conceptual backgrounds, research design, review of literature, microscopic overview of ecotourism in the PTR, results and discussions of the primary data and summary of findings and suggestions.

Finally, the study has found certain genuine problems that largely lead to disturbing the visitors and Tiger Reserve due to the lack of proper facilities and amenities and unregulated visitor inflows, more importantly entry of large number of day visitors. On the other hand, the EDC has not become so effective in bringing about radical changes of socio-economic conditions of the local people. Thus, the study has come out with some suggestions like improvement of basic facilities, amenities, service quality, disaster preparedness, regulation of entry of visitors, parking management, imposition of user fees, conservation measures, collaboration and participation, carrying capacity management, etc. Lastly, a model was developed to be used as a guiding principle for all the stakeholders at the PTR. However, the future research may venture into the other dimensions of sustainable ecotourism.

**KeyWords:** Ecotourism, Community Participation, Sustainable Development, Protected Areas, Visitor Satisfaction.